From Japan to Africa: Transnationality in Hani Susumu's Theory and Cinematic Experience

Marcos P. Centeno-Martín

Abstract

This paper assesses the transnational dimension of Hani Susumu's film theory and practice. Hani engaged in the theoretical discussions about avant-garde art, which was developed by the culture circles that proliferated in postwar Japan. However, his 'filmmaking method' is to a great extent shaped by foreign influences: a 'synthetic art' combining photography and literature and emotional approaches to the social reality of the thirties by American authors linked to the 'New Deal', the humanist tendency in the British documentary movement, Robert Flaherty, the authors who engaged in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the personal criticism developed by Polish filmmakers.

Hani's filmmaking method which propses filming non-scripted action with non-professional actors is aimed at capturing a world free from filmmakers' pre-established ideas. *The Song of Bwana Toshi,* shot in East Africa, is the first of a series of films that Hani made in remote places. Africa becomes a place that allows Hani to challenge the reality that is imposed by a filmmaker, as he can film spontaneous actions by characters that do not know cinema and are alien to concept of acting. Thus, Hani finds in Africa a cinema that rejects cinema and its artifice. Hani also uses these remote locations to present the protagonist's encounter with Japan outside Japan where the dichotomy between the concepts of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside) become ambiguous. Hani's case reveals an extraordinary sensitivity to foreign ideas and transnational film practices and illustrates how the singularities of Japanese Cinema are not necessarily the result of the isolation of this film culture.

Key words: Hani Susumu, *The Song of Bwana Toshi,* Africa and cinema, transnational cinema, New Wave, Japanese film theory, art of synthesis, *uchi* and *soto*

Introduction

The approach to the work of Hani Susumu is essential to understand the theoretical discussions and film innovations that took place in Japan since the second half of the twentieth century. Hani is a widely known figure of the Japanese New Wave for his films made in the sixties. However, in this paper I seek to explore a lesser known aspect of his career: the transnational dimension of his film contribution which is two-fold, theoretical and practical. Firstly, the transnational dimension of his theoretical writings. Hani participated in the Japanese debates that emerged in the post-war culture circles, represented the positions of the New Left in Japanese documentary cinema, challenging old forms of realism and proposing new subjective approaches to reality. Yet, not all the debates, epistemological tools and references that Hani handled came from a national context. What was the role of Flaherty's works, the British Documentary Movement and the authors representing the Spanish Civil War in articulating his theoretical approach?[1]

Secondly, Hani developed a singular filming based on "protagonists who do not act" that he adapted in his documentary films made in the fifties. However, from the sixties, Hani engaged in a series of transnational productions that brought him from Africa to Latin America and Southern Europe. The second part of this text focuses on *The Song of Bwana Toshi* (1964), the first work that Hani made abroad and probably the first film made by a Japanese filmmaker in Africa. The analysis of this case study is supported by Hani's own writings in order to cast light on the reasons why Hani decided to move his productions to distant places from Japan.

Transnationality in Hani's film theory

From the beginning of his career as a documentary maker for Iwanami Eiga, Hani was a prolific film essayist, critic and theorist. He wrote texts on film theory between 1955 and 1967, on the television medium (1959-1960),

[1] I am deeply grateful to DAIWA Anglo-Japanese, Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation and Waseda University and Japanese Government (MEXT), which have financially supported this research as part of the project entitled "Japanese Transnational Cinema".

and on visual arts and mass media (1969-1972). Hani anticipated the renewal of the cinematic language of the fifties and sixties both in practice and in theory through dozens of texts that he published in this period. I assessed elsewhere how Hani engaged in the theoretical discussions developed by the culture circles that proliferated in Japan from the aftermath of World War II led by Marxist critics Hanada Kiyoteru, Sekine Hiroshi, Hariu Ichirō, the painter Okamoto Tarō and the writer Abe Kōbō and the fine arts student and later New Wave filmmaker Teshigahara Hiroshi (Centeno-Martín 2019a).

These authors sought news ways of representing (documenting and transforming) reality and engaged in the creation of a 'synthetic art' (*sōgō geijutsu*) whose aim was dismantling genre codes and breaking down boundaries previously established in literature and arts. Hani Susumu, together with the avant-garde filmmaker Matsumoto Toshio, joined the aforementioned authors in 1957, in a group that was named Kiroku Geijutsu no Kai (Documentary Arts Society), and the notion of 'document' acquired within the circle a broader sense, including visual and performing arts, as it was stated in their new leitmotiv: "from printed culture to visual culture" (Key 2011: 13). Thus, Hani promoted an active exchange between documentary film and other means of expression: "Today there is an exchange between different genres outside the cinematic arena: music, fine arts, dance, etc. I think we can make some headway in cinema if we try a similar collaboration" (Hani 1959b: 71). Hani implemented these ideas in the collective documentary *Tokyo 1958* (1958), made alongside Teshigahara and other seven other members of the experimental group Shinema 58. The film challenged previous cinematic conventions combining a documentary style with elements from advertising, TV commercials, theatre (*kakegoe* voices in the soundtrack), classical music (*gagaku*), plastic arts (*ukiyo-e,* woodblock prints) and photography (Centeno-Martín 2019a).

Hani also participated in the ideological rupture of postwar Japan and represented a new left of intellectuals and artists which responded to old forms of realism and pretensions of objectivity, which were seen as a mark of an authoritarianism (Centeno-Martín 2019a: 4). He also engaged in discussions with the veteran Kamei Fumio (Hani and Kamei 1957, pp. 40-47) and the young Matsumoto Toshio (Hani et al. 1956, pp.45-52) about the new approaches to reality that avant-garde documentary makers should

propose. Hani rejected Matsumoto's experimentation with visual effects and defamiliarising techniques in order to project on screen filmmaker's fantasies and concerns. Instead, he repeatedly claimed that documentaries should explore the emotional plane of characters before the camera rather than the subjectivity and pre-established ideas existing in the mind of the filmmaker (Centeno-Martín 2019a: 4).

Throughout a number of texts, Hani developed a consistent method of documentary filmmaking based on interrogating the inner world hidden in the external world, challenging filmmaker's prejudices, which might be achieved through technical aestheticism, filming on location, improvisation, rejecting scripts and professional actors and repetition of certain topics and narratives tropes (Centeno-Martín 2018a). However, I would like to highlight in this manuscript the transnational dimension of Hani's theoretical framework, which is incomplete if it's only studied in relation to debates raised within the national context. His writings present a rich variety of references to authors, films, concepts and methodological approaches which shaped his theoretical approaches and go far beyond the national parameters.

First, Hani identifies antecedents of the 'synthetic art' explored by the avant-garde circles in postwar Japan in examples which proliferated in the world in the thirties. In the US, authors from the New Deal era portrayed their social reality by bringing together the fields of literature and photography like Erskine Caldwell's novels *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and *Say, Is This The USA* (1941) on the conditions of peasants in the southern states which include pictorial surveys by his wife, the photographer Margaret Bourke-White. Hani also reviews other examples like John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) in which literature and photography take on an informative role close to the documentary, just like John Dos Passos' trilogy *U.S.A.* (1930-1936) which blends several narrative forms using fiction literature, press clippings, song lyrics and biographies of well-known characters. A combination of different means of expression would also be found in Archibald MacLeish's works, *The Fall of the City* (1937), the first American verse play written for radio and in *Land of the Free* (1938) about poverty and the class struggle combining poetry and photography (Hani, 1960: 73-75).

However, rather than proposing any objective depiction of the social

reality, Hani finds interesting the emotional approach of these works interesting and how they help authors to think ways to get closer to human reality. Hani articulates a sort of subjective realism in a truly interdisciplinary way, drawing on Robert Bresson's proposal of dealing with the filmed objects claiming that "progress is made by bringing together real circumstances and subjective circumstances" (Hani 1960: 57). Also combining the 'life document' (seikatsu kiroku) practices of the 1950s Japan and consisting in amateur writings (Centeno-Martín 2018b) with the psychological pragmatism developed by William James (cfr. Hani 1975, 345-349; 1981).

Hani also admired the works by the British documentary movement and published reviews of films by Stuart Legg, John Grierson, Paul Rotha, Basil Wright, Alberto Cavalcanti, Arthur Elton, Howard Hawks, Richard Rosson and Stanley Hawes.[2] The British movement was an inevitable reference although Hani did not follow their depiction of the working class but the tendency to humanism they present which, as Hani notes, was motivated by presence of Robert Flaherty in Britain. While Hani acknowledges that Flaherty's films had been undermined for his staged sequences, such as those in *Nanook of the North* (1922), he claims that this is a pioneering film for the human eye with which Flaherty portrays the Inuit's world (Hani 1972: 36).

Hani also finds this tendency in two other examples before World War II. First, the humanism of "proletarian spirit" found in Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), particularly for the representation of capitalism and power relations (Etō, Hani and Satō, 1960: 47). Second, the authors who depicted social injustices and were personally engaged in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Hani finds the emotional approaches of André Malraux, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos' novels extremely inspiring. Similarly, Robert Capa's photography brings a new kind of photojournalism which goes beyond the portrayal the social reality and captures human fears, anxieties and desires of the people featured in the image (Hani 1960: 80). This combination of topical issues and emotional depth that they developed is a trait that, according to Hani, should be implemented by documentary makers. To Hani, the Spanish Civil War is a pivotal moment in which authors from different countries merged arts and journalism with a singular

[2] Hani comments on the conversation he had with Stuart Legg in Hani 1958: 88-120.

humanism that he also wanted to explore (Hani 1959: 47-50; 1960: 80). So does Capa's birth of modern photojournalism as well as Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer with their literary journalism (Hani 1960: 80). These authors combine a portrayal of current affairs and psychological depth in a kind of 'art of synthesis' which merges journalistic practices and arts. As Hani notes in relation to the Spanish case: "it is problematic to separate artists from journalists […] they all have the privilege of building the object and the news according to their own expressive capacity" (Hani 1960: 80). All of them expressed great emotional empathy with the objects they depicted. Hani highlights that these authors inaugurate a way of portraying the current affairs of a reality that had to be denounced, in a journalistic sense, with a close gaze to the human condition.

The aforementioned break within the Japanese left which Hani embodied is a cultural phenomenon that also had a lot to do with events happening outside Japan. To a great extent, the discussions within the Japanese avant-garde circles were prompted a result of authors' rejection of the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Uprising in November 1956. On the occasion of his visit to Hungary and Poland in the end of the 1950s, Hani publishes several articles in which he nuances that the Hungarian uprising was triggered by a desire to improve socialism rather than to return to capitalism but also criticizes Stalinism and the restoration of János Kádár's government (Hani 1961a, 1961b, 1961c). In addition, he writes reviews of Polish films by Andrzej Wajda, Andrzej Munk, and Jerzy Kawalerowicz in which he finds interesting responses to socialist realism (Centeno-Martín 2019b) through their "personal criticism" (*jiko hihan*) which contributes toward the expansion of the idea of authorship that was being debated in the context of the New Waves (Hani 1963: 132).

Transnationality in Hani's Film Practice

Throughout his writings published between 1950s and 1960s, Hani proposed a singular film-making method, the aim of which was to capture this inner dimension free from filmmakers' subjectivity, prejudices and pre-established ideas. In order to do that, he proposed that documentary makers should work with several kind of protagonists who don't act (Hani 1958). I

studied before how Hani implemented these theories in his documentaries made for Iwanami Eiga in the fifties, by filming children and animals (Centeno-Martín 2016). The reasoning for choosing these characters was that their spontaneous actions allow exploring unconscious instincts and a psychological dimension that is not controled by filmmakers. I also analysed how Hani even applied his method for the shooting of a temple (Centeno-Martín 2019b) and for his first feature film *Bad Boys* (Furyō shōnen, Hani 1960) (Centeno-Martín 2018b). However, I would like to pay attention now to Hani's transnational production. In the early sixties, Hani embarks on a series of projects shot on remote locations, *The Song of Bwana Toshi* (Bwana Toshi no uta, 1964) in East Africa, *Bride of the Andes* (*Andesu no Hanayome,* 1966) in the Peruvian Andres and *Mio* (*Yōsei no uta,* 1972) in Sardinia. In this text, I will focus on his first production abroad, *The Song of Bwana Toshi,* also probably the first made by a Japanese director in Africa, to interrogate the motivations behind this transnational cinematic experience.

The shooting of *The Song of Bwana Toshi* took place in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyica (current Tanzania) between July and November (Hani 1965: 5-16) with a slim team of six operators and only two professional actors: the protagonist, Atsumi Kiyoshi , who became a popular star a few years later for his leading role as Tora-san in *Otoko wa tsurai yo,* the longest-running film series starring a single actor with 48 instalments, released between 1969 and 1995; and Shimomoto Tsutomu, who plays the role of Onishi, a photographer working on pictorial reports of gorillas. Among the crew members, one can find several figures who were closely linked to the Japanese New Wave: the cinematographer Manji Kanau and sound recorder Yasuda Testsuo, who had already worked under Hani's direction in *Bad Boys* (Furyō shōnen, 1960), a semi-documentary in which the inmates of Kurihama reformatory play themselves. Thus, Manji and Yasuda were already trained in Hani's kind of collaborative work based on improvisations, shooting on location and with no professional actors. Also, the musician Takemitsu Toru, who composed soundtracks for Teshigahara Hiroshi, Shinoda Masahiro, Oshima Nagisa and Imamura Shohei's films, became hallmarks of the New Wave.

The Song of Bwana Toshi is based on Katayose Toshihide's homonymous novel (Katayose 1963) although, following Hani's principle of rejecting the traditional idea of script, the shooting was largely left to

improvisation. The story revolves around a Japanese technician, Kataoka Toshio (Kiyoshi Atsumi), called 'Toshi' by the locals. Toshi arrives in rural Tanganyika to build a prefabricate house for a Japanese study group only to find that they have become ill and returned to Japan. The protagonist is left alone to erect the house but there is no way to do it without the support of the Africans. Without knowing the local language and culture, Toshi needs to learn about adapting to the locals' leisurely and unpretentious lifestyle. He first attempts to speak with the leader of a village but his attempts to speak Swahili lead to confusion and instead of helping him build the house they end up giving him a job as a cowherd. Unable to carry out this job, Toshi goes back to the house-building works and bumps into Hamisi (Hamisi Salehe) who is looking for a job. Both start working together but Toshi does not allow Hamisi's wife to stay with them so she decides to find a job at the plantation of a white man, where she will suffer tragedy and Hashimi won't see here again. Little by little, more young men end up assisting Hani in the building of the house but their way of working infuriates Toshi and he ends up hitting Hamisi. Despite all this, Hamisi forgives Toshi and after a trial for Toshi's treatment to his assistants, Hashimi agrees to help him again and finish the house, giving a moral lesson about the human values of the locals.

Filming Protagonists who do not Act in Africa

Hamisi and the other African characters in *The Song of Bwana Toshi* were not professional actors but locals who agreed to collaborate in the film, and as Hani notes, they belonged to different tribes: Hamisi came from the Isanzu, while other characters like Samuele, were Kikuyu and Mardi, another collaborator was a Lega person from Maniema in Congo (Hani 1966: 146).[3] Hani carefully observed the specific cultural codes of these communities, and through their actions, he discovered an uncanny and mysterious universe. This allowed Hani to explore the complex world beyond the filmmaker's common

[3] Hani's film *Bride of the Andes* (*Andesu no Hanayome,* 1966) was screened at the National Film Archive of Japan (NFAJ), as part of the programme for the second symposium on 'Japanese Transnational Cinema' hosted by Waseda University between 22nd and 23rd July 2019. I am in debt to Japanese Government (MEXT) as well as Professor Nori Morita from Waseda University and Alo Joekalda from NFAJ for their support.

sense and pre-established ideas which he claimed through his writings. He acknowledges that he did not always understand their behaviours but he made efforts to capture this reality in the film (ibid). For example, in one scene, Hamisi and Muze ask Toshi whether he has cows in Japan. Hani wandered why the people in the village had cows and were interested in them as there was barely any grass, their milk was scarce and the locals hardly ever ate meat. However, Hani would later notice that the value of a cow was a fortune and they needed them to be able to marry (Hani 1973: 107).

Here one can find one of Hani's main motivations for traveling to East Africa. First, this remote location allowed him to challenge the reality that is imposed by filmmakers. Second, Hani could put into practice his ideas about filming spontaneous behaviour and capturing the veracity of non-planned and non-scripted actions (Hani 1973: 155). Africa provided Hani a place where he could access a deep level of the human condition by filming characters who behave according to their own intuition —a strategy that he had already explored through his cinematic experiences with children and animals—. According to Hani, the characters on screen did not know cinema, theatre or literature; in other words, they were alien to concepts such as acting, performance and representation. They did not transmute themselves into an 'alter-ego' before the camera and they were not necessarily conscious of being playing a role (Hani 1973: 152). Occasionally, Hani claims to have captured real feelings and emotions, like those of Hamisi toward the young woman who played the role of his wife in the film. Hamisi fell in love with her during the shooting, they would usually eat together and after the filming they usually stayed talking passionately until Hamisi finally proposed to her (Hani 1973: 111).

The social and historical context also ends up playing a role and shaping the narratives of the film. In a sequence before Toshi's trial, images of a meeting in the village where a spokesman talks about the development of the country are followed by an officer telling Toshi that foreigners have only brought violence to their land. The viewer should bear in mind that when Hani filmed *The Song of Bwana Toshi,* Kenya had just achieved its independence from the United Kingdom the year before, and resentment towards foreigners was quite intense. Hani found that even in the independent African countries he visited, most of the technicians and bureaucrats were still foreigners and

there was an atmosphere of mistrust, as the locals were concerned about the possibility of white people retaking the power and discriminating against the black population again (Hani 1966: 139).

Thus, Hani proposes in Africa a cinema that rejects cinema and its artifice. While the characters acted following certain instructions from the film crew, they were not aware that they were making a film (Ibid). Since the cinematic medium was unknown to them, their only base for their acting was remembering how they behaved in past experiences. According to Hani, they did not explain the film plot to the actors- as in any case, they did not seem too interested- but merely presented them with a situation, and showed them the position before the camera (Hani 1973: 152). Therefore, they were left with no choice other than to follow their own instincts, which in the end, projected a more faithful portrayal of these individuals' inner world.

Hani Susumu and Hamisi, during the shooting of *The Song of Bwana Toshi*. Source: Hani 1965: 154.

During the shooting, Hani and his crew also devoted much energy and time to filming wildlife. Hani had already worked observing animals' behaviour in *Zoo Diary* (Dōbutsuen nikki, 1957), which was shot in Ueno Zoo, Tokyo.

The Song of Bwana Toshi features elephants, giraffes, snakes, antelopes and other animals which anticipate Hani's later works on African fauna such as his TV documentaries *The Animal Family* (*Dōbutsu kazoku,* Fuji TV, 1974-1975), *Hani Susumu's Mother Africa* (Hani Susumu no mazā Afurika*,* TBS, 1993-2009) and his film, *A Tale of Africa* (Afurika monogatari, 1980). In *The Song of Bwana Toshi,* Toshi bumps into another Japanese man, Onishi (Shimomoto Tsutomu), a passionate photographer of gorillas. Toshi accompanies Onishi to the mountains to take photos of these animals, only to find the dead body of one of them. This sequence reproduces the actual trip of Hani and his crew crossing Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda and reaching the border with Congo to film the gorillas as well as other animals (Hani 1965: 5-16).

In addition, Onishi embodies metaphorically the encounter with Japan outside Japan, a trope that Hani repeatedly uses in his transnational films. Hani uses the relationship between the protagonist and other Japanese characters to renegotiate traditional ways of understanding and representing the concepts of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside). I follow here Creight's argument understanding *uchi* and *soto* as a "general sense that all of Japan creates an *uchi,* a national inside boundary of affiliation, in contrast to everything that is *soto* or outside of Japan" (Creight 2009: 212). According to Creight, foreigners reaffirm this dialectic that founds Japanese identity, as they embody *soto.* However, Hani challenges these forms of 'national' affiliation in *The Song of Bwana Toshi,* where distinction between *uchi* and *soto* becomes increasingly blurred. While at the beginning, Toshi sees the local Africans as an 'other' whose language and culture are incomprehensible, his interactions with the other evasive Japanese, who refuses to live with him, reveals that the idea of *uchi* needs to be redefined. Thus, Hani dismantles this dichotomy *uchi/soto* by forcing the protagonist to engage with the 'other' and find his place outside. Toshi ends up building closer ties with the Africans and these interactions help the viewer rethink the notion of 'otherness' in the film. In the last scenes, the protagonist eventually changes his mindset and attitudes, showing that the 'other' is now his previous self, leaving Japan and the rest of the Japanese in an ambiguous position between the *uchi* and *soto.*

Conclusion

A close study to the transnational dimension of Hani's theories reveals a truly fascinating phenomenon of global flows of ideas, discussions, images and concerns. While it is still essential to assess Hani's approaches to filmmaking in relation the theoretical debates that took place in Japan among postwar culture circles and avant-garde artists, his theoretical stance cannot be completely understood without taking into account Hani's interactions with authors, ideas and film movements beyond Japan. In addition, it is revealing to see how in order to apply his 'filmmaking method', Hani pioneered a kind of transnational production shot in remote places, which allows him to explore worlds that are alien to that of the filmmaker and common Japanese people.

The case study presented here, including both Hani's writings and film, is interesting as an example illustrating how, unlike early Western accounts suggested, the singularities of Japanese Cinema are not necessarily the result of the isolation of Japanese authors. This essentialist and often 'Orientalist' approaches to Japanese Cinema tended to neglect the sensitivity of Japanese filmmakers to foreign ideas and transnational film practices. Hani's case reveals precisely how Japanese Film can be studied as an exceptional place for international exchange of images, conceptual frameworks and filmmaking styles. Examples like this make increasingly evident the need to reformulate the old 'national' paradigm, as Japanese film and media often expanded beyond its national borders. This should not undermine the weight of Japanese aesthetical, philosophical and theoretical tradition but on the contrary, should help us to contextualize it properly within the global film culture.

Biographical Note

Marcos P. Centeno-Martín, Ph.D., is lecturer and coordinator of the Japanese Studies programme at Birkbeck, University of London. Before that, he worked at SOAS where he taught several courses on Japanese Cinema and convened the MA Global Cinemas and the Transcultural. He was also Research Associate at the Waseda University, Research Fellow at the Universitat de València. He has worked for several years on Hani Susumu's theoretical and practical contributions to documentary film. His research

interests revolve around Japanese documentary film, transculturality, postwar avant-garde and representation of minorities.

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